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Intent to Study Abroad: Results and Lessons from a Pilot Study

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Abstract

As campuses in Japan attempt to internationalize, student mobility has emerged as a prominent theme in the discourse of higher education stakeholders. This article introduces a pilot study that aims to provide the foundation for academic mixed-methods research involving the differences between those with strong intent to study abroad and those with weak intent. Results from the main study could lead to a definition of self-selection that relates to study abroad participation, alongside recommendations of how second language (L2) curriculum may be improved through integration of an international dimension. This paper first provides a rationale for conducting the research by examining literature focused on internationalization, study abroad intent, and the role of pilot studies. Selected results of the pilot study are shared alongside commentary discussing the effectiveness and efficacy of the proposed research instrument – with particular focus on the sample, the multi-scale items of willingness to communicate and international posture, and the establishment of intent to study abroad. Based on the data, and in consultation with the respondents and a focus group, certain inadequacies in the pilot study were identified, which led to notable changes in the revised instrument. Contingent on these changes, the amended data collection tool should be effective in generating empirical results that can be used in answering the research questions of the main study.

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Introduction and Research Questions

Japanese higher education institutions (HEIs) have recently been concerned with the development of *global jinzei,* which can be translated as *global talent* (West, 2015). In fostering this, efforts to diversify the country's campuses have been deemed as an effective approach to internationalization, while graduating students who can more effectively compete in the global workforce. This focus on competitiveness manifests on campuses through the presence of more international students and staff, while sending more Japanese students abroad for academic sessions of varying lengths.

Study abroad, or student mobility, is defined as "a temporary sojourn of predefined duration, undertaken for educational purposes" (Kinginger, 2009). Despite global trends of increased participation, involvement of Japanese students has been in decline since the mid-2000s (OECD, 2014; MEXT, 2013). Less than 1% of all Japanese higher education students are enrolled in programs overseas, which has caused alarm amongst stakeholders, as the participation rate is dwarfed by regional neighbors of China (2.1%) and South Korea (3.5%) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). One could identify a correlation in both the decline of study abroad participants and overall population of university-aged students; however, enrollment at Japan's more elite institutions has remained relatively stable over the last few decades (CIA World Factbook, 2015; MEXT, 2010).

If examining the cultural profile of Japanese society, an "inward-looking attitude" (West, 2015, p.15) and strong tendency towards the cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance are reasons why Japanese students are hesitant to venture abroad (The Hofstede Center, 2016). Resistance to change and being averse to uncertainty would have a negative impact on the prospect of a Japanese student venturing into an unfamiliar country; however, this would not address why students seem less willing to study abroad now than in the past. Considering that top-tier Japanese HEIs are maintaining enrollment numbers despite the overall decline of this demographic nationwide, it can be hypothesized that entrance requirements and academic standards have been eased, and that students today may be less intellectually and personally curious to enroll in study abroad programs than in the past.

To generate data that can be used for the actionable purpose of garnering interest in cross-cultural opportunities and increasing intercultural competences domestically, the following research questions were established:

1) Which factors differentiate those with strong intent to study abroad from those with weak intent?
   1 a) To what extent, if any, is there a relationship between study abroad intent and the perceived benefits and barriers of study abroad?

1 b) To what extent, if any, is there a relationship between study abroad intent and willingness to communicate in both L1 and L2?
1 c) To what extent, if any, is there a relationship between study abroad intent and international posture?
2) In the Japanese context, what could be a suitable definition of *self-selection* that could be applied to those with strong intent to study abroad?
3) Is there a need for the university to revise its L2 curriculum to better prepare students for cross-cultural experiences?
3 a) If so, how?

Through this research, I hope to gain a better understanding of the perceived benefits and deterrents of study abroad for first-year Japanese university students and how they may contrast with those empirically established in other global contexts. If the research can yield data applicable to the research questions, then perhaps domestic L2 curriculum can involve a more significant global dimension, thus generating more interest in cross-cultural opportunities. The pilot study described in this article is an initial step in accomplishing these objectives.

Literature review

Being a notoriously difficult word to define, the *internationalization* of higher education settings around the world has been attempted in various ways, depending on the interpretation. Knight (2004) defines internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p.11). In contrast, research conducted with numerous presidents of Japanese universities reveals that internationalization is aligned with global competitiveness and rankings (Yonezawa, 2010); a perception often challenged by academics such as Knight, who bemoans the stance as superficial and designed solely for "status building initiatives to gain world class recognition and higher rankings" (2011, p.1).

The prominence of English in Japan's education system has been prevalent since internationalization initiatives began in the early 1980s. At that time, an *English First* mentality was introduced in higher education as part of the reforms that considered English as a gateway to the world outside Japan (Kubota, 2015). Contemporary programs have seen a shift, from the learning of the English language to cultivating "Japanese with English Abilities" (Kubota 2015). Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has also been setting goals for English proficiency, starting in secondary schools with the establishment of Super English Language High Schools in 2002.

A greater focus on hosting international students has been identified as a way to bolster profiles of the country's top institutions. In an ethnically homogenous country like Japan, a large and visible foreign presence on campus is believed to precipitate greater global recognition, and in turn, better rankings. One initiative centered around this notion is Global 30, which aims to attract 300,000 students by 2020 while sending over 120,000 Japanese students abroad in the same period (Global 30, 2012). There is some concern that standards of foreign students are being compromised in order to get such a large influx on campuses. In reaching quotas, there is concern that those accepted for exchanges in Japan will be academically under-achieving and possibly without any genuine interest in Japan or its culture (Keller, 2007; Ninomiya, Knight & Watanabe, 2009). This casts doubt into whether simply having more foreign students on campus actually improves the intercultural competences and disposition of Japanese students studying domestically. Progress reports of the Global 30 campaign have not been overly promising. In terms of the number of foreign students studying on Japanese campuses, the number of 124,000 in 2008 rose to only 137,750 in 2012 − a marginal increase in hopes of eventually hosting 300,000 by 2020 (ICEF Monitor, 2013). In addition to Global 30, the Japanese government launched a 77 million USD initiative in 2014 called Super Global Universities that aims to develop graduates who are able to "walk into positions of global leadership" (Maruko, 2014, para.18). It is believed that a more significant presence of foreign students and faculty on Japanese campuses will contribute to establishing up to 10 Japanese universities in the world's top 100. Currently, there are only two Japanese HEIs in the top 100 of the Times Higher Education World University Index (Times Higher Education, 2015): the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University.

For Japanese students who study abroad as part of the aforementioned initiatives, research has suggested that sojourns overseas provide an opportunity to improve language skills while taking significant steps in acquiring the intercultural abilities needed to become world citizens, that might not be realized by those studying domestically (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Clarke III, Flaherty, Wright & McMillen, 2009; Pernsteiner, 2013). In their comprehensive study of 3,400 students who studied abroad from 1950 to 1999, Dwyer and Peters (2004) measured the perceived benefits assimilated through student mobility and categorized them under the themes of 1) personal growth, 2) intercultural development, and 3) education and career attainment. Highlights of the data include 96% of respondents claiming an increase in self-confidence, 98% boasting a better understanding of personal cultural values, and 87% claiming that study abroad influenced subsequent academic or professional decisions in the post-return stage. In terms of the student mobility hosts, an influx of foreign students benefits a large number of

stakeholders, including the university of origin, the transportation industry, local economies, and of course, the hosting university as foreign students tend to pay higher tuition than domestic students.

In academic literature that explores study abroad intent, international posture is rarely discussed. Being an attitudinal variable intended to determine one's connection with the international community, international posture was designed specifically for Japanese students, though it can be applied to any global context. International posture is comprised of variables, each consisting of at least four question items: intercultural approach-avoidance tendency (7 items), interest in international vocation (6 items), interest in foreign affairs (4 items), ethnocentrism or reactions to different customs/values/behaviors (5 items), and willingness to communicate to the world (6 items). Research has supported the hypothesis that Japanese students with higher international posture exhibit a greater degree of motivated learning behavior (Yashima, 2002; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004); however, there are no studies that suggest whether Japanese students with higher international posture also exhibit stronger intent to study abroad.

As an extension of the communicative approach theory of the 1990s (Savignon, 1997), the idea of integrating the *intercultural dimension* into curriculum will provide the foundation of developing domestic curriculum that can improve intercultural competences while possibly enhancing international posture, even amongst those who might usually be less willing to consider study abroad (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). Also referred to as the international or global dimension, the intercultural dimension aims to help learners interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms. Through classroom activities rooted in culture and cross-cultural interactions, interlocutors can become more aware of their own identities en route to becoming *intercultural speakers* who not only excel at cross-cultural communication but also the building of human relationships. This seems well-suited for an ethnically homogenous student body－as often found in Japan－that tends to struggle with L2 anxiety and a tendency to carry ethnocentric attitudes and beliefs.

The Pilot Study

Pilot studies, or feasibility studies, represent a small-scale version of a primary investigation. To increase the likelihood of executing a successful research project, the pilot study can involve the following: small-scale versions of the actual study, trial runs performed to prepare for the actual study, or evaluations of research instruments. In research involving a significant quantitative component, conducting a pilot study is a critical step. Dornyei (2010), who discourages the conducting of quantitative research without first executing a pilot, states numerous pitfalls that can

plague research if a pilot study is not conducted. These include the possibility of respondent fatigue, items that might be ambiguously worded, and questions that are complicated or overly sensitive in nature, thus causing respondent discomfort.

In creating the pilot study discussed in this article, I first established a list of target conditions. These include a desire for the survey to be completed in less than 20 minutes, to avoid respondent fatigue; inclusion of an engaging, rich mix of items and question types; and ultimately, questions that would effectively yield usable data that can contribute to answering the research questions. The final pilot instrument comprised of both single and multi-scale items to be classified based on the theoretical framework of the main study. The survey instrument was initially created in English; however, all respondents are non-native speakers of English, so a professional Japanese-English translator was hired to translate all items into Japanese. Following this translation, a focus group of six former Japanese students with high proficiency in English examined the items and conducted backward translation to ensure consistency in meaning. The members of this group have a profound interest in language and research, so they were motivated and enthusiastic to take part in such research. I met with these students regularly to assist with English language club activities, English assignments (e.g. dissertations), and English applications for study abroad and employment with English-speaking corporations. From these continuous interactions, I vetted them as trustworthy, reliable, and competent. After the items were confirmed as unambiguous, they were uploaded into Survey Monkey − an online survey administration platform. The program allows for anonymous completion of digital surveys, and the processing of simple statistics, such as statistical significance and A/B testing.

Survey Items: Single and Multi-Scale

Initial questions of the survey were intended to collect background information, so single-items were adopted from previous studies to accomplish this (Kasravi, 2009; Stroud, 2010). Themes of such items include fields of study, financial resources, living arrangements, and academic standings. Next, several questions were integrated into the instrument to establish perceived benefits and drawbacks of studying abroad (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015). Finally, study abroad intent was determined by a single-item question asking “How certain are you that you will study abroad during your time at this university?”, with students identifying their degree of certainty ranging from 0% (I absolutely will not) to 100% (I absolutely will).

In transitioning to multi-scale items, I integrated two instruments believed to be suitable for answering the research questions, the first being McCroskey and Richmond’s (2013) tool to establish willingness to communicate. This is a 20-item in-

strument that asks respondents to evaluate the likelihood that they would engage someone in conversation in different situations (see Appendix). By indicating a range from 0 (never) to 100 (always), examples of scenarios include “talking with a stranger while waiting in line” and “talking in a small group of friends”. Results from this are then calculated with a provided formula to determine overall willingness to communicate with others. Given the comparative nature of this study and the possible outcome that respondents may be more inclined to engage in conversation in one language over another, I asked respondents to complete this 20-item scale twice: once for their propensity to communicate in Japanese (in Japan) and once in English (while in a predominantly English-speaking country). This culminated in 40 questions to be answered.

The second multi-scale item is Yashima’s (2002) international posture instrument. This tool involves a 6-point Likert scale with answer options ranging from “I strongly disagree” to “I strongly agree” for 22 items. The items are classified into the following four variables: intergroup approach-avoidance tendency (7 items), interest in international vocation (6 items), ethnocentrism (5 items) and interest in foreign affairs (4 items). With analysis in SPSS, internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha) can be established amongst each of the four variables along with their relationship with study abroad intent.

Administering the Survey

The sample utilized for this pilot study comprised of current students of the university under investigation, and particular care was given in the selection process so that none of the respondents would also be invited to take part in the main study. To ensure this, second year students were primarily targeted to participate whereas the main study exclusively involves first-year students enrolled in a particular L2 class. Involving mostly second-year students in their first semester of study satisfies the criteria that the pilot sample should be “similar to the target sample the instrument has been designed for” (Dornyei, 2010, p.53). Potential respondents were identified from the public university database and invited to participate by email. In addition to the invitation to join, they were presented with all the conditions of anonymity and freedom to not participate, that were stipulated in the ethics approval process pertaining to the main study. Those who agreed to participate in the pilot were able to access the online survey on a device of their choosing within a two-week period. Respondents were requested to not only complete the survey, but to reflect and generate a response regarding the overall flow and structure of the instrument. As a final step, they were encouraged, but not required, to respond to specific questions:

- Were any of the questions difficult to understand?

- Would you word any of the questions differently?
- Were any of the questions unnecessary?
- Did the English and Japanese seem consistent for each question?
- Did you experience any discomfort or frustration with the survey questions?
- Any other comments about the survey?

Following the two-week deadline, the call for participation yielded 70 complete submissions that were analyzed in both Survey Monkey and SPSS. The instrument proved to be suitable in addressing the overall goals of the pilot study and research questions. For instance, most respondents completed the survey in under 20 minutes and there were no reports of respondent fatigue. For the few who took longer than 20 minutes, it was revealed from the additional questions that they simply spent more time verifying that translations were accurate, which was requested. A few minor issues emerged about the wording of questions, and these were presented to the focus group for revision.

Survey Results: Sample

The sample involved 70 students, with a near balance of male and female participation (see Table 1). As discussed, 2nd year students were targeted for the pilot, however other students also agreed to join. As seen in Table 2, 70% of all respondents were in second year with a small percentage of students in first, third, and fourth year. For those in their first year of study, measures were taken to ensure that they would not be part of the main study, which involves exclusively first-year students.

Survey Results: Multi-Scale Items

The pilot study was effective in identifying two major issues that required action before commencing data collection for the main study. Regarding the McCroskey and Richmond (2013) willingness to communicate instrument, there were many inconsistencies with how students answered the questions. Despite bilingual directions deemed as clear and straightforward by the focus group, different outcomes emerged. Almost half of the respondents simply gave the same answer for

Table 1 Respondent numbers—quantitative phase

Groups	Total *N*	Gender	Ratio
All respondents	70	38 F, 32 M	54:46

F = female M = male

Table 2 Respondent year of study (N=70)

Year of study	Total	%
1st year	9	13
2nd year	49	70
3rd year	8	11
4th year	4	6

every situation, and many of those that did offer different answers seem to have done so in an indiscriminate manner. Other respondents did not give answers for either the 20 situations in Japan (using Japanese) or abroad (using English). After reading the comments and probing the results with the focus group, some cultural implications surfaced regarding the individual items of the instrument. For example, the instrument prompted respondents to indicate a percentage of the time (0 to 100) they "would choose to communicate" in certain situations. While interacting with strangers such as store employees, garbage collectors, and mail delivery people might be commonplace in certain countries, such small talk or personal engagement would not readily occur in Japan. The data of the pilot study reflects this as students answer inconsistently with multiple respondents explaining that they were "not able to imagine" these situations, neither domestically nor abroad. Adding extra inconsistency and ambiguity to the answers is that some of the respondents have been abroad while others have not. For the latter, interacting with strangers in English while abroad is a very abstract concept that can be difficult to envisage. Due to this, it became evident that the McCroskey and Richmond (2013) instrument needed to be omitted from the final survey instrument, along with research question 1b) "To what extent, if any, is there a relationship between study abroad intent and willingness to communicate in both L1 and L2?".

Yashima's original (2002) international posture tool involves 22-items across the four variables of approach-avoidance tendency, interest in foreign affairs, interest in international vocation, and ethnocentric tendency. After collecting data for the pilot study, responses were grouped accordingly in SPSS, and alpha values for all four variables were computed to determine internal consistency (Dornyei, 2010). Internal consistency is represented by the Cronbach Alpha, and this is based on correlation between answers of a particular variable. To exemplify this, if all respondents answered exactly the same way to all four items of the "interest in foreign affairs" variable, then the Cronbach Alpha would be 1.0, reflecting perfect consistency. There are different standards of what is considered as adequate consistency; however, in the social sciences, a Cronbach Alpha of over .9 is deemed excellent, .7 to .9 is good, and .6 to .7 is acceptable (Kline, 1999). Results from the internal consistency analysis is seen in Table 3. While the overall international posture value is pushing excellent status (.88), one can see that ethnocentrism falls below the .6 threshold (.57). In response to this, there was debate on whether to keep ethnocentrism in the analysis; however, I decided to keep it since its elimination would have a negligible impact on the overall Cronbach Alpha of international posture. Also, since the ethnocentrism score is near to .6, I decided to see if more consistency in the sample – all first year students taking the same elective English course – would yield improvements in reliability. It warrants mention that a low degree of ethnocen-

Table 3 Cronbach Alpha coefficients for International Posture

Variable	Alpha
Approach-avoidance	.74
Interest international vocation	.76
Interest foreign affairs	.85
Ethnocentrism	.57
International Posture	**.88**

trism is common in studies that utilize the international posture instrument (Yashima, 2010; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008).

As discussed, the McCroskey and Richmond (2013) instrument to determine willingness to communicate did not yield the desired outcomes, so it is to be excluded from the primary study. While eliminating this from the research would degrade the overall potential impact of analysis, an alternative was found within Yashima's updated (2009) international posture instrument. This involves the same four variables and items as the 2002 instrument, but also includes six items specifically pertaining to willingness to communicate or "having things to communicate to the world". It was a simple decision to adopt the 2009 version for the main study as it would be easy to integrate the additional six items. Furthermore, the variable essentially seeks to identify the same outcome as the McCroskey and Richmond (2013) instrument.

Another major change that emerged from analysis of the pilot study involves the determination of intent to study abroad. As mentioned, this was originally established by a single item question where respondents evaluated their intention to study abroad based on a scale of 0 to 100. Based on the respondent feedback, there did not seem to be any misinterpretation of this; however, I found myself in agreement with the notion that "(m)inor differences in how a question is formulated and framed can produce radically different levels of agreement or disagreement" (Dornyei 2010, p.23). As a result, I developed a 5-item scale involving differently worded iterations of "I intend to study abroad during my time at university", including a negatively worded item to address the possibility of students indiscriminately selecting the same response for every question. After consultation with the research focus group, these five items will be integrated within the 28 international posture items embedded in the revised instrument, each based on a 6-point Likert scale.

Conclusion and Future Implications

Conducting a pilot study proved to be critical in identifying survey items that were both effective and unsuitable. After making the aforementioned changes, the

survey instrument is better designed to collect data that will address the research questions. Conclusions drawn in the main study could have implications to all HEIs in Japan, and possibly beyond, but suggestions will first apply to the university under investigation and how it might improve curriculum domestically through the integration of an international dimension in L2 classes. This domestic focus addresses the reality that many students do not have the privilege to go overseas due to financial or personal restrictions. One study from South Korea (Jon, 2013) provides a potential model involving the redesigning of domestic curriculum, which aims to foster intercultural competences amongst students to a similar degree as those who can go on international sojourns. Even in more ethnically heterogonous learning environments, such as many in the American context, simulated cross-cultural experiences and interactions have resulted in even greater intercultural communicative benefits than those who actually did study abroad (Soria & Troisi, 2013).

If change can first manifest at the classroom level, where teachers might integrate more intercultural content into the domestic curriculum, then the fostering of intercultural competences and educational value may be realized. This would benefit not only students who intend to study abroad but also those who lack the means to participate. Furthermore, such an approach to integrating the international dimension into L2 classes could help bridge the gap between conflicting interpretations of internationalization. If L2 teachers can develop such competences to foster curiosity in study abroad, then ultimately, participation in overseas sojourns may increase, thus satisfying the internationalization criteria of both Knight (2004, 2011) and Japanese stakeholders concerned with global rankings and competitiveness in the job market (Yonezawa, 2010; Jones, 2013).

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Appendix

Willingness To Communicate (WTC)
McCroskey, J. C., & Richmond, V. P.. (2013).

Willingness to communicate is the most basic orientation toward communication. Almost anyone is likely to respond to a direct question, but many will not continue or initiate interaction. This instrument measures a person's willingness to initiate communication. The face validity of the instrument is strong, and results of extensive research indicate the predictive validity of the instrument. Alpha reliability estimates for this instrument have ranged from .85 to well above .90. Of the 20 items on the instrument, 8 are used to distract attention from the scored items. The twelve remain items generate a total score, 4 context-type scores, and 3 receiver-type scores. The sub-scores generate lower reliability estimates, but generally high enough to be used in research studies.

Directions: Below are 20 situations in which a person might choose to communicate or not to communicate. Presume you have completely free choice. Indicate the percentage of times you would choose to communicate in each type of situation. Indicate in the space at the left of the item what percent of the time you would choose to communicate. (0 = Never to 100 = Always)

_____1. Talk with a service station attendant.
_____2. Talk with a physician.
_____3. Present a talk to a group of strangers.
_____4. Talk with an acquaintance while standing in line.
_____5. Talk with a salesperson in a store.
_____6. Talk in a large meeting of friends.
_____7. Talk with a police officer.
_____8. Talk in a small group of strangers.
_____9. Talk with a friend while standing in line.
_____10. Talk with a waiter/waitress in a restaurant.
_____11. Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances.
_____12. Talk with a stranger while standing in line.
_____13. Talk with a secretary.
_____14. Present a talk to a group of friends.
_____15. Talk in a small group of acquaintances.
_____16. Talk with a garbage collector.
_____17. Talk in a large meeting of strangers.
_____18. Talk with a spouse (or girl/boyfriend).
_____19. Talk in a small group of friends.
_____20. Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.

Scoring:

Context-type sub-scores –

Group Discussion: Add scores for items 8, 15, & 19; then divide by 3.

Meetings: Add scores for items 6, 11, 17; then divide by 3.

Interpersonal: Add scores for items 4, 9, 12; then divide by 3.

Public Speaking: Add scores for items 3, 14, 20; then divide by 3.

Receiver-type sub-scores –

Stranger: Add scores for items 3, 8, 12, 17; then divide by 4.

Acquaintance: Add scores for items 4, 11, 15, 20; then divide by 4.

Friend: Add scores for items 6, 9, 14, 19; then divide by 4.

To compute the total WTC score, add the sub scores for stranger, acquaintance, and friend. Then divide by 3.

All scores, total and sub-scores, will fall in the range of 0 to 100